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“Soar on Wings Like Eagles”: Elizabeth Seton’s Spirituality of Trust

BY

JUDITH METZ, S.C.

*“But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not grow faint.”
(Is. 40:31)*

This scriptural verse from Isaiah is one of many that lifts our spirits and fills us with joy. Reflecting on this passage, we might feel that we are called to a state of jubilant anticipation of a coming time when we will all live in unbounded happiness — amidst a beautiful harmony of spirit. Imagine what it would be like to “soar on wings like eagles”!

This passage, however, is not about some future time — it is about *now*! It is a promise that if we *hope* in the Lord, we *will* have renewed strength; we *will* run and not grow weary, walk and not grow faint.

Elizabeth Bayley Seton, founder of the American Sisters of Charity, is an example of someone who did live in this spirit of hope, an American saint who offers a model of someone who matured into living in this spirit through the ups and downs of a very active and often tumultuous life. Many of us are somewhat familiar with the broad strokes of Elizabeth’s life — of how she was a devoted daughter and friend, a loving wife and mother, a struggling single parent and convert to the Catholic faith, and, ultimately, the founder of the first congregation of active women religious in the United States. What bears a closer look is how this woman, in traversing the many roles and transitions of her life, was able to respond to God’s invitation to an ever deepening relationship of trust.

Listen to her voice in her maturing years as a widow, single mother, and religious founder:

- “I can jump over all the troubles of this life with more gaiety and real lightness of heart than even *even* Betsey Bayley played and laughed, ...sometimes I can hardly contain my interior cheerfulness.” (1813)¹

¹ Regina Bechtle, S.C., and Judith Metz, S.C., eds., Ellin Kelly, mss. ed., *Elizabeth Bayley Seton: Collected Writings*, 3 Vols. (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City Press, 2000, 2002, 2006), 2:255. Hereafter cited as *Collected Writings*. Punctuation, spelling, and usage have been changed to reflect contemporary usage.

- And several years later (1816): “ — *Our God is God* — all as he pleases — I am the happiest creature in the thought that not the least thing can happen but by his will or permission, and *all for the best* — Our God! Echo it back, dearest one, *Our God*.”²

Isn't this the voice of someone who is running without growing weary or faint?

Born in New York City, 28 August 1774, Elizabeth Bayley was a child of the American Revolution. Coming from a prominent and respected family, she enjoyed the benefits of a good education, summers in the country, and an active social life. Yet, from an early age her life was one of contrasts: between privilege and hardship, between intense joy and profound suffering. But it was also a life lived in a deep sense of the divine presence. Death was an early visitor. Her mother died when Elizabeth was just three, and her younger sister, Catherine, died eighteen months later. Perhaps it was these experiences that caused the young Elizabeth to turn so readily to God and to a sense of the sacred — a sense that sustained her even in times when she was not blessed with a realization of God's imminent presence.

Elizabeth's widowed father quickly remarried, but his new home was not a welcoming place for Elizabeth and her older sister, Mary. Yet, in her earliest recorded memories at the age of six, the young girl describes “taking my little sister Emma up to the garret window, showing her the setting sun told her God lived up in heaven and good children would go up there... teaching her her prayers.” She also mentioned that her stepmother taught her the 23rd Psalm, “The Lord is my shepherd, there is nothing that I lack” — a prayer of reliance on God, a prayer that remained a favorite throughout her life.³

With their father deeply involved in his profession and their home environment tense, Elizabeth and her sister Mary spent their childhood and teen years shuttling between New York City and their uncle's home in New Rochelle, a city just north of New York. It was here that the young girl cultivated a deep attachment to nature. She “delight[ed] to sit alone by the water side [of Long Island Sound] — wandering hours on the shore humming and gathering shells — every little leaf and flower or animal, insect, shades of clouds or waving trees, objects of vacant unconnected thoughts of God and Heaven.”⁴

² *Ibid.*, 2:373.

³ *Ibid.*, 3a:510.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 3a:511.



The Filicchi portrait of Elizabeth Seton, circa 1804.
 Courtesy, Daughters of Charity Province of St. Louise Archives, Emmitsburg, Maryland

Elizabeth later recalled an incident as a teenager in the year 1789 when her father was in England, perhaps even dead. Jumping into a wagon that was driving into the woods, she set off by herself, and coming upon a meadow she found a sweet bed of rich moss under a warm sun. Surrounded by the sounds of spring and the smells of the wild flowers, she remembered, “I thought at that time my Father did not care for me — well God was my Father — my All. I prayed — sung hymns, cried — laughed in talking to myself of how far he could place me above all Sorrow — Then laid still to enjoy the Heavenly Peace that came over my Soul.” Feeling a deep security that God would never forsake her, she realized: “God was my Father and I quite independent of whatever might happen.”⁵ Years later, confined in quarantine in Italy, Elizabeth recalled this incident and thrilled again at the “Heavenly Peace” that came over her and “felt so peaceable a heart — so

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:264 and 3a:511.

full of love to God — such confidence and hope in Him.”⁶ Although this experience marked Elizabeth, her life was not a straight, soaring path of spiritual growth.

Back in New York in her late teenage years, Elizabeth became engaged in the social world of theater, dances, and parties. She met and married William Magee Seton, heir to a prominent shipping business. Their home was a happy one, and their early years together were prosperous and blessed with children. Their first-born, Anna Maria, arrived in May 1795, just 16 months into their marriage. She was quickly followed by her brothers, William and Richard. Catherine was born in 1800 and the youngest, Rebecca, two years later.

In the early years of Elizabeth’s marriage, her growing family enjoyed a cheerful and comfortable life. Shortly after she and William wed, they moved into a fashionable residence on Wall Street. Elizabeth rejoiced in her “own home at 20”⁷ that she and Will furnished with completely new pieces.⁸ Each year during the summer/fall fever season the family escaped the city to enjoy a residence on either Long Island or Staten Island, with William often commuting to the city during the week.

The Setons’ lives changed considerably with the death of William’s father in early June 1798. Elizabeth and William assumed responsibility for William’s six youngest siblings, which necessitated moving to the larger Seton family home — but not before Elizabeth gave birth on July 20 to her third child and second son. Both mother and new-born were almost lost in the birthing except for the expertise of Elizabeth’s father, Dr. Richard Bayley. Although only twenty-four, Elizabeth now described herself as “not the lively animated Betsy B but the softened matron with traces of care and anxiety on her brow,”⁹ while William wrapped his “grief [at the loss of his father] in the stillness of despair.”¹⁰

As a young married woman Elizabeth was deeply influenced by her physician-father, who worked tirelessly to improve public health care and died ministering to yellow fever victims at the quarantine station in New York harbor. Following his example, Elizabeth was no stranger to benevolent activity. As a founding member and officer in the Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children, the young matron devoted time and energy to assisting the poor, bringing them what relief she could.

However, even before her younger children were born, economic

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:265.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 3a:513.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 1:103.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1:34.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:33.

difficulties and her husband William's declining health cast ponderous shadows over the family. The Seton mercantile business was negatively affected by the disruption of shipping on the Atlantic Ocean due to the havoc created by the French Revolution, causing the couple to be concerned over their resources being "sufficient to maintain and educate a numerous family."¹¹ In addition several yellow fever epidemics took their toll as Elizabeth worried over the vulnerability of family members and suffered the deaths of her dear father as well as several close friends. At the same time William began to increasingly experience the effects of tuberculosis.

By late 1799 William Seton was in serious financial difficulty, and a year later his company was forced to declare bankruptcy. In early December 1800 Elizabeth wrote, asking her friend Julia Scott: to "turn you[r] mind to your friend and view the changes of the last few years in my lot, and when you have traced it to the present period, figure to yourself, Mr. Garret Kittlet as the winder up of the Bankrupts, sitting in our Library taking inventory of our furniture, goods, etc."¹² A few weeks later she continued the saga, telling Julia that she had "given up [her] list to the Commissioners of Bankruptcy of all we possess, even to our and the children's clothing."¹³

During this time of changing circumstances and shifting fortunes, Elizabeth was not able to reclaim the firm sense of God's love and protection she had enjoyed earlier. In her writings from these years, clearly influenced by the rationalistic thinking of the period, she refers to God in such impersonal terms as: "the Author and conductor" of this world and the next; "a Superior Providence" on whom she has a perfect reliance; and "that Power that gives [her] the sacred charge" of caring for her sick children.¹⁴ "For myself," she told her friend Julia, "I think the greatest happiness of this Life is to be released from the cares and formalities of what is called the World."¹⁵ Gone was the sense that God was her Father, her All, of talking to herself of how far He could place her above all sorrow. Although she was reading scripture and devotional books, their messages were not touching her in the deepest recesses of her heart or leading her to intimacy with God.

But for all his seeming absence, God was not far away. Providentially, at the same time that the Bankruptcy Commissioner was in their library taking inventory, a new minister arrived at Elizabeth's Trinity Episcopal parish. In her first mention of him Elizabeth exuded, "Mr. Hobart this morning —

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1:39.

¹² *Ibid.*, 1:141.

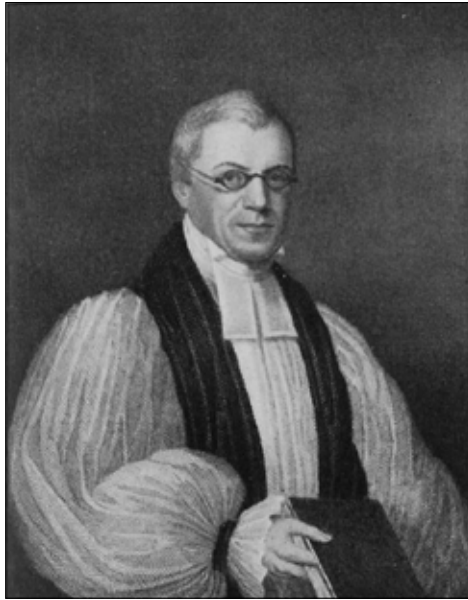
¹³ *Ibid.*, 1:143.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:49, 55, 68-69.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:142.

language cannot express the comfort, the Peace, the Hope.”¹⁶ What a blessing this fervent young prelate was to become for Elizabeth, an angel sent from God — her “angel of New York.”

Elizabeth’s life changed significantly with the arrival of Reverend Henry Hobart. Full of enthusiasm for his ministry, he won many followers through his ardor, personal warmth, and sensitivity. Elizabeth was swept up by his preaching style, and in him she found someone who fanned the flames of love of God in her soul and who seemed to desire the same kind of all-embracing love for God which she knew possible. “Give H.H. a *look* and a *sigh* for me,” she wrote one morning when she was unable to attend Trinity.¹⁷



John Henry Hobart (1775-1830). Third Episcopal bishop of New York.

From a painting by J.W. Paradise, 1844.

Public Domain

Beyond his preaching, however, Hobart led Elizabeth back to her earlier experience of a deep relationship with God. In notes to her sister-in-law Rebecca, she wrote of “our treasure, the greatest indeed of all blessings,” and how this day her soul “flies to Him, the merciful giver of this unspeakable blessing without one fear or drawback....” “Merciful Father,” she prayed, “graciously save it from the worst of all misery — that of offending its Adored

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:144.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:162.

Benefactor and Friend.”¹⁸ Elizabeth moved from “superior Providence,” “Author and conductor of life,” and “power,” to “Merciful Father,” Adored Benefactor,” “Friend.”

From this point forward Elizabeth’s journals and letters were filled with prayers and exclamations of her reliance on her heavenly Savior:

- “[C]ontinue to me this privilege beyond all mortal computation, of resting in You, and adoring You, my Father-Friend — and never failing Support — for this alone I implore, let all other concerns with their consequences be entirely and wholly submitted to You.”¹⁹
- And “The cup that our Father has given us, shall we not drink it? Blessed Savior!... You have declared unto us that all things shall work together for our Good if we are faithful to You, and therefore if You so ordain it, welcome disappointment and Poverty, welcome sickness and pain — welcome even shame and contempt, and calumny. If this be a rough and thorny path it is one which You have gone before us. Where we see Your footsteps we cannot repine. Meanwhile You will support us with the consolations of Your Grace....”²⁰
- Then, “[A]nd do I realize it — the protecting presence, the consoling grace of My Redeemer and God.... — He is my *guide*, my *friend* and *Supporter* — With such a guide can I fear, with such a friend shall I not be *satisfied*, with such a supporter can I fall.”²¹

Although Elizabeth’s fortunes did not improve with Reverend Hobart’s arrival, her approach to life and her ability to deal with challenging situations changed dramatically. She was able to turn to God in her troubles and to express reliance and trust that he was her guide, friend, and supporter. She was joyful in her belief that if God sent trials and difficulties, he would also give her the strength to respond. She became convinced that in her own suffering she was being drawn closer to her God in imitation of what he had already suffered for her.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1:174, 180.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 3a:18.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 3a:21.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 3a:32.

It was with this disposition that in the fall of 1803 she and her husband and their oldest daughter, age eight, embarked on a sea voyage to Italy in the hope of restoring William's ever-worsening health. Among the items Elizabeth took were her "Treasures" — her Bible, spiritual books, and a small hand-copied booklet of Henry Hobart's sermons. Their effort was fruitless. After being detained in quarantine for 30 days, William died 27 December 1803.

The trip, however, proved to be a turning point in the young widow's spiritual life. The month she spent in her "immense Prison... locked in and barred... a single window double grated with iron,"²² led to growth in the conviction that only with God's sustaining hand could she endure such an experience. "God is with us," she wrote shortly after their incarceration, "and if sufferings abound in us, His Consolations also greatly abound, and far exceed all utterance."²³ A week later she reflected: "I find my present opportunity a Treasure — and my confinement of Body a liberty of Soul which I may never again enjoy while they are united."²⁴ Upon the death of her husband Elizabeth wrote this entry in her journal: "In all this it is not necessary to dwell on the mercy and consoling presence of my dear Redeemer, for no mortal strength could support what I experienced."²⁵

Over her five-month stay in Italy, Elizabeth became increasingly impressed by the generosity and the devout faith of her Catholic hosts, the Filicchi family. As they escorted her to visit magnificent Renaissance churches and to experience the solemn rituals of Catholicism, Elizabeth was deeply moved. She felt drawn to this religion, especially to its focus on the centrality of Eucharist.

After her return to New York, now a single mother of five small children, Elizabeth experienced a wrenching nine months of indecision before she made her profession of faith in the Catholic Church (at the time, a tiny and reviled religion in the United States). She described it to her friend Amabilia Filicchi: "[I]n New York... they say Catholics are the offscourings of the people, somebody said their congregation [is] 'a public nuisance.'"²⁶ As Elizabeth well knew beforehand, her decision drove a wedge between her and many of her family members and friends. She lost the desperately needed support that should have sustained her in her struggle to maintain her young family.

The three years Elizabeth remained in New York after her entry into the Catholic Church were a time of trial by fire. She struggled mightily to

²² *Ibid.*, 1:251.

²³ *Ibid.*, 1:253.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:257.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:275.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 2:372-73.

support her family and to discern her future, yet she was able to maintain an inner peace that flowed from her deep reliance on God.

After three years of social tension and financial hardship, Elizabeth accepted an invitation from the Sulpician priests and Bishop John Carroll to move her family to Catholic Baltimore and open a school. She soon found herself the center of a nascent community of women interested in living religious life in the United States. Elizabeth fit the role of “Mother” well. She was warm and nurturing, self-sacrificing, strong and courageous, challenging and encouraging.

Donated property outside the rural Maryland village of Emmitsburg became the motherhouse of the American Sisters of Charity. Elizabeth spent her last years there among her sisters and students. She shared life fully with them as they prayed, studied, and enjoyed the beauty of their valley home. She especially looked forward to their Sunday treks to the parish church at Mount St. Mary’s, where she taught catechism to the local children and spent the afternoon in quiet prayer on the wooded hillside near Our Lady’s Grotto. Devotion to the Blessed Mother became especially meaningful to Elizabeth,



Elizabeth Seton and children. Painting by Elizabeth Prongas, 1979.
Courtesy, Daughters of Charity Province of St. Louise Archives, Emmitsburg, Maryland

who had lost her mother at an early age. She also reflected deeply on Mary's experiences as the mother of Jesus, using them as a model for her own role as mother to her children and to the students at the sisters' school.

In her years at Emmitsburg, Elizabeth experienced a series of heart-wrenching losses through death: two young sisters-in-law, Harriet and Cecilia Seton, who were like daughters to her, several of her religious companions, and two of her own daughters.

Elizabeth's oldest daughter, Anna Maria, held a special place in her mother's heart. In many ways Elizabeth saw much of herself in the young girl, and the two enjoyed a strong bond. Anna Maria had accompanied her parents to Italy and proved to be a support and comfort to her mother during the long days in quarantine. When Elizabeth expressed interest in Catholicism, Anna responded enthusiastically. But from a young age, the girl showed signs of "the family complaint," tuberculosis. Even in the Lazaretto, when her daughter was but eight years old, Elizabeth wrote: "She coughs very much with a great deal of pain in her breast."²⁷ As a teenager, after the move to Emmitsburg, Anna continued to manifest signs of the disease — the burning cheeks and the racking cough. By late 1811 Elizabeth wrote to her friend, Julia Scott, "My precious comfort and friend is undergoing all the symptoms which were fatal to our Cecilia and so many of the family."²⁸

Elizabeth was able to approach her daughter's impending death with a degree of equanimity. She wrote to a friend in Baltimore, "She is almost an Angel and poor Mother happy indeed to see her so well prepared for her Eternal happiness."²⁹ And in her journal she reflected: "Eternity always at hand! Oh Annina I look to the far distant shore, the heaven of heavens — a few days more and Eternity — *now* then, all resignation, love, abandon. Rest in him —"³⁰

Elizabeth's immediate reaction to Anna's death, 2 March 1812, at age sixteen, was one of acceptance and peace, but as the months passed and her youngest daughter, Rebecca, needed to be taken to Baltimore for medical attention, the bereaved mother's resolve weakened. She asked one friend, "[O]nly pray that [the poor Mother] may be strengthened,"³¹ and to another she confessed, "[F]or three months after Nina was taken I was so often expecting to lose my senses and my head was so disordered that unless for the daily routines always before me I did not know much what I did or what

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:260.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 2:201.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:208.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 3a:432.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 2:217.

I left undone.”³² With time Elizabeth was able to overcome her grief through her deep trust in her God. Reflecting in her journal: “[A]ll, all for our good, so good Master = and the advancement of his Kingdom which will also be ours in Eternity — Eternity! O word of transport! Word of Ecstasy! *Eternity*.”³³

Elizabeth now came face-to-face with Rebecca’s increasing debility. While her older sister was dying, the ten-year-old child had slipped and fallen on some ice. Despite visits to eminent doctors in both Baltimore and Philadelphia, little could be done for her tubercular hip. By the beginning of 1813, Elizabeth wrote to Julia Scott: “[L]ovely gay little Beck is entirely lame and never leaves my room even with her crutch unless carried out of it.... So and so and so, and all this we take in the course of things from the hand of our dear compassionate Master who no doubt intend[s] to take more care of this darling and bless her more than the rest.”³⁴

Over a nearly four-year period Elizabeth cared for her crippled daughter as her health steadily deteriorated. Near the end the grieving mother spent countless hours holding the fourteen-year-old girl in her lap until she died 3 November 1816. The following day, Reverend John Dubois noted: “The Mother is a miracle of divine favor. Night and day by the child, her health appeared not to suffer. She held the child in her arms without dropping a tear all the time of her agony.”³⁵ And Elizabeth, in describing the funeral to Reverend Simon Bruté, wrote: “ — Rebecca laid so low beside Annina almost touching her coffin which could plainly be seen... Mother could think of nothing but *Te Deum*... heart high above.”³⁶ Elizabeth clearly returned to the disposition she earlier expressed, at the time of the deaths of her two sisters-in-law, when she wrote: “Faith lifts the staggering soul on one side, Hope supports it on the other, experience says it must be — and love says let it be.”³⁷

As Elizabeth moved through the trials with her children, the birthing pains of founding a new religious congregation, and dealing with her own declining health, her trust in God’s providential care grew. The major focus of her prayer centered on cultivating a sense that God was intimately present in her life and could be relied on to guide her through each moment. She came to express this conviction as being open to the “grace of the moment” — a firm belief that God was present and active in each event of her life.

One of the great blessings of Elizabeth’s mature years was the spiritual friendship she enjoyed with Reverend Simon Bruté, her “angel of

³² *Ibid.*, 2:224-25.

³³ *Ibid.*, 3a:432.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 2:238.

³⁵ Annabelle M. Melville, *Elizabeth Bayley Seton* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1951), 246-47.

³⁶ *Collected Writings*, 2:431.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 2:117.

the Mountain.” This young French missionary first came to Emmitsburg for a brief stay in the summer of 1811. From their first meeting he and Elizabeth enjoyed a lively friendship, at the heart of which was a deep, shared spirituality. During one of his absences Elizabeth referred to herself as “an old black stump” without the “live coal which used to give it the Blaze in a moment.”³⁸

These two zealous souls both encouraged and tempered each other. When he spoke restlessly of moving to other missionary fields, she reminded him of the good work he was doing in America. “You made the lesson of the grace of ‘the moment’ so very plain to me,” she told him, “I owe you perhaps my very salvation.”³⁹ Elizabeth had earlier written to him on the same theme, telling him: “I am... going as you know to meet everybody in the grace of the moment, which we can never know till we find the humor and temper of the one we are to meet with.”⁴⁰

Probably no one knew Elizabeth’s inner soul better than Bruté. They enjoyed discussing Scripture and the spiritual classics, and the pious priest encouraged Elizabeth to broaden her Catholic background by reading and translating some of the books that were part of his library. As Elizabeth’s health declined, the two exchanged frequent notes about the events of the day, but they especially shared their spiritual insights and their strong emotions and desires for God. She told her friend: “Now I think for one spark of desire I have ever had to love our God and to *show* I love, I have a towering flame,”⁴¹ “[M]ind not my follies,” she reflected; “I see the everlasting hills; so near, and the door of my Eternity so wide open that I turn too wild sometimes.”⁴²

Content in her situation, Elizabeth wrote: “[E]very day I ask my... Soul what I do for it in my little part assigned, and can see nothing but to smile, caress, be patient, write, pray and WAIT before him —”⁴³ And finally, “[T]hrough the thousand pressings and overflowing — God — God — God — that the Supreme delight, that he is God and to open the mouth and heart wide that he may fill it.”⁴⁴

When Elizabeth died 4 January 1821, her friend Simon Bruté wrote long and stirring accounts of the holiness she manifested during her last days. He told her daughter Catherine: “O, such a mother! Such faith, such love! Such a spirit of true prayer, of true humility, of true self denial in all, of true charity to all — truest charity! Such a mother!”⁴⁵

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 2:316.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:607. Bruté was a medical doctor.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 2:402.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 2:663.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 2:606.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 2:594.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 2:684.

⁴⁵ Simon Bruté to Catherine Seton, n.d., quoted in: Mary M. Meline and Rev. Edward F.X. McSweeney, *The Story of the Mountain* (Emmitsburg, Md.: *The Weekly Chronicle*, 1911), 97.

Elizabeth Seton lived and died in a spirit of hope. At times she struggled, at times she dwelt on her own failures and shortcomings. She did not always experience the loving presence of God in her life. Alongside of this, however, she never lost the solid grounding of knowing that God would never abandon her, that no matter how hard things were, God's strong arm was there to protect her.

Truly living in a spirit of hope, Elizabeth Seton was someone who was able to "run and not grow weary, walk and not grow faint." Because she so thoroughly and absolutely trusted that God was guiding her, she was able to "soar on wings like eagles."